



ASSESSING COMMUNITIES' COPING STRATEGIES DURING THE CURRENT DROUGHT IN SOMALIA

Research Brief: Somalia Resilience Population Measurement (RPM) Activity

May 2023

While famine in Somalia has been averted during the first quarter of 2023, 6.5 million people are still need humanitarian assistance.¹ Moreover, a sixth consecutive rainy season with below average rainfall is expected, and the risk of famine (Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 5) remains possible. The global community must take urgent action to protect communities on the frontline of the global climate crisis and help them to be more resilient in the face of worsening climate shocks.

The Somalia Resilience Population Measurement (RPM Activity) conducted a qualitative and quantitative study to understand if and how households are coping during the ongoing drought. RPM is a five-year USAID-funded project coordinated and co-implemented by Mercy Corps. Through a five-year panel survey and recurrent monitoring survey (RMS), the project seeks to improve upon current resilience measurement approaches in order to inform program adaptation and better decision-making. In this first round of the RMS, the research team focused on agro-pastoral households living in select geographics zones (livelihood zones 15 & 16²), as they are the most severely affected by the drought.

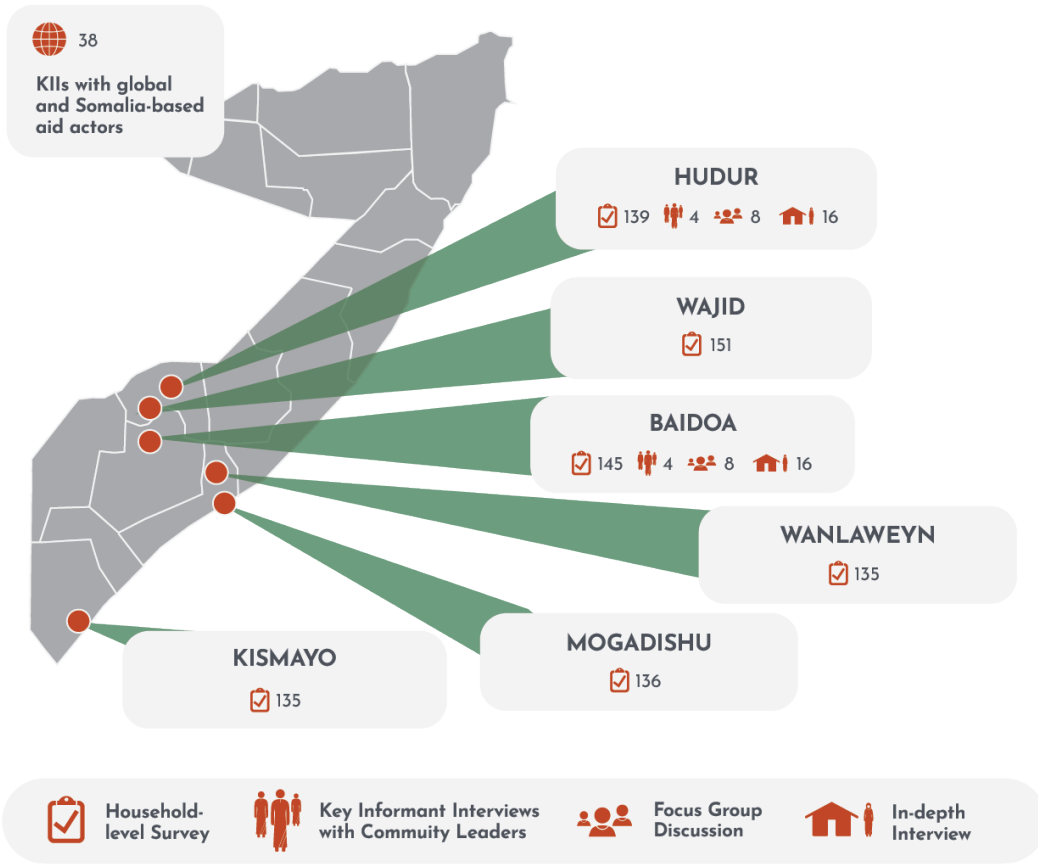
WHAT CAN WE DO?

As the drought continues to threaten the lives and livelihoods of millions of pastoralists and farmers in Somalia, communities and households are employing a wide range of resilience capacities³ to respond to the drought. Conver-

¹ Meaning Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 3) or worse; [FEWS NET \(2023\)](#).

² A livelihood zone is an area within which people share broadly the same pattern of livelihood, including options for obtaining food and income and market opportunities. See [FEWS NET Somalia Livelihood Zone Map](#).

³ Resilience capacities refer to the strategies households utilize to improve their long-term wellbeing and bounce back effectively in the face of shocks and stresses. Coping includes the short-term strategies households rely on in response to shocks and stresses. Distress strategies refer to households' responses once they have exhausted their coping strategies and adversely impacts their long-term wellbeing (e.g. reducing food consumption)



sations with global and local aid actors, community leaders, and program participants in Somalia helped to identify vital short-term strategies that can address the immediate impacts of the drought, as well as long-term programming to strengthen household resilience.

Invest in long-term resilience-focused activities like village savings and loan associations and savings groups.

Activities must support households to diversify their livelihoods in the face of emergent shocks and protracted crises. One of the most critical capacities to emerge during the study was the capacity to diversify livelihoods, particularly among those primarily focused on agro-pastoral activities. Among households that reported faring better during the drought,

access to vocational training and village savings and loan associations and/or savings groups had a decisive impact on their livelihoods and resilience.

Time cash assistance activities to households' debt cycle to increase effectiveness and take advantage of opportunities to bolster local markets.

Access to loans and credit has been critical to households' capacity to survive and access basic resources during the drought, with external assistance often used to not only repay debts in a timely manner but establish creditworthiness among local businesses. Monitoring household debt cycles and repayment patterns alongside routine market monitoring, including among local traders and vendors, may also enable aid actors to identify opportunities to further reinforce local markets through intentional assistance to small businesses. As a result, aid actors may be better able to time activities and allocate assistance amounts (particularly cash assistance) to ensure they achieve programmatic outcomes.

Research Priorities

Households in drought-prone areas employ a wide range of capacities to prepare for and respond to climatic shocks. To understand what unique capacities have been effectively employed in anticipation and response to the current drought, this research focused on outlier households,⁴ which are defined as individuals who employ somewhat uncommon yet effective strategies to respond to adversities and ultimately fare better compared to their peers from similar backgrounds. Research examined which communities and households have managed to prepare and respond to the drought more effectively at different time points, what resilience capacities were being employed, and whether or not they received external assistance in addition to early warning signals of distress.

⁴ Also known as positive deviant households. Positive deviance is the "behavioral and social change approach which is premised on the observation that in any context, certain individuals confronting similar challenges, constraints, and resource deprivations to their peers, will nonetheless employ uncommon but successful behaviors or strategies which enable them to find better solutions." For more information on positive deviance see [BetterEvaluation](#).

To understand the strategies considered effective, the initial round of qualitative data collection of the RMS consisted of interviews and focus groups and informed the design of a quantitative field survey to determine the prevalence of this behavior within the chosen subpopulation. The first set of learning questions below helped elucidate which capacities mattered for these outlier communities in the context of the current drought and to highlight opportunities for adaptation and investment.

1. **Who are the outlier communities in the context of the current drought? Which resilience capacities and resources are they using to respond to the current drought? And how do these capacities and resources shift over time, in response to different stages of a shock/crisis?**
2. **At what point do outlier communities start depleting their existing capacities and start applying distress coping strategies? How can aid actors better monitor these signals?**
3. **In what ways are outlier communities benefiting from NGO-led interventions to adapt to and cope with the current drought (and their ability to access/exercise critical coping strategies)?**

What Did We Learn?

Research found that while these outlier households were equally impacted by the severity of the drought, their effective use of coping and resilience strategies allowed them to withstand its ramifications for much longer. They continue to fare better than the average household in their community even as the drought stretches on, due to a number of factors, including access to credit and cash assistance, and through diversifying their income sources.

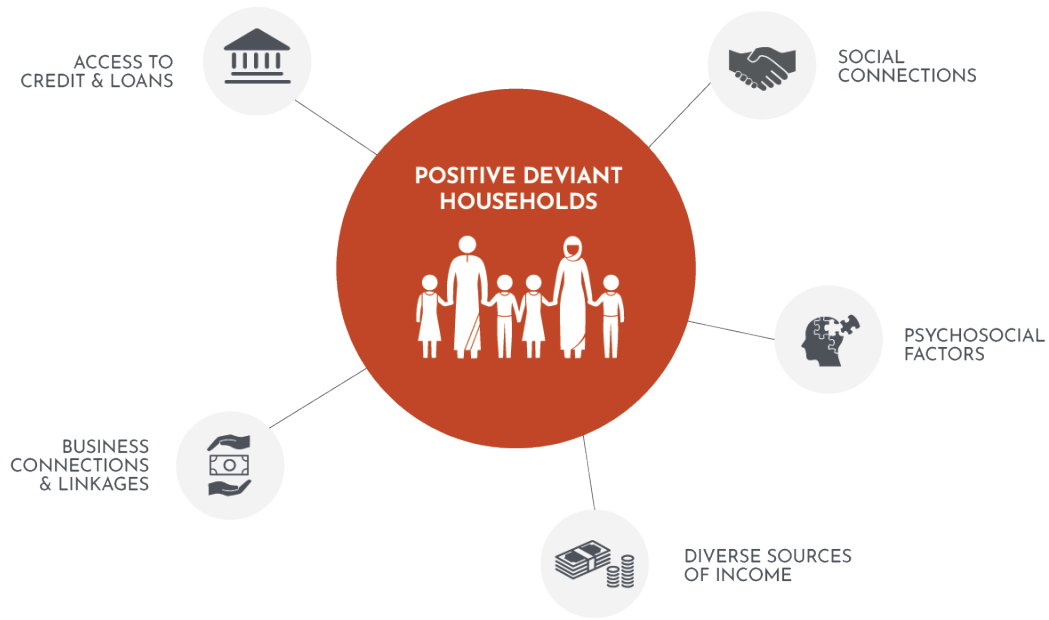
"[Outlier households] have no worries about the current drought because of their long-lasting plan for maintaining their lives. They have different income generating activities like, poultry raising, small business, small vegetable gardens, money exchange and being part of community savings that they put aside a small amount of each month."

-Male casual laborer, Morshinile IDP camp, July 2022

The quantitative survey showed us that these outlier households in the sample exhibit higher levels of food security relative to typical households, with adults and children being more likely to have at least two meals a day. Furthermore, these outlier households were substantially more likely to report using the following capacities when compared to typical households: access to credit and borrowing (37% vs. 8%) and finding casual labor opportunities in town (25% vs. 4%). When looking at livelihoods, prior to the drought, typical households were more dependent on farming income than the outlier households, who were more dependent on business income. Farming income sources have fallen substantially since the beginning of the drought while business income sources are nearly unchanged. While both outlier and typical households struggled to access credit at times, outlier households were able to find more local informal sources of credit to cope with the drought. Overall, there were low levels of reported types of NGO support received, with the highest categories being short term and long term cash transfer programs (8% and 7% respectively), and most was used to meet immediate needs or to pay back credit. These findings align with Mercy Corps' research about greater reliance on markets, social networks, and local support systems over traditional aid to cope with crises.⁵ The qualitative findings draw out more nuanced findings below.

- Two factors were decisive when it came accessing credit: 1) individuals that were well-known or well-established in their community were more likely to receive credit versus those that were not, and; 2) households that were selected to receive external assistance, which they often used to repay debts, found it easier to access credit from local business owners.
- Many households that received external assistance reported using it to repay their debts in a timely fashion, which helped to establish their creditworthiness among local businesses and shop owners and ensure future access to credit.
- For those who primarily engaged in agro-pastoral livelihoods, having multiple sources of income—particularly non-agricultural activities—helped households meet some needs and access some basic necessities. These individuals often engaged in casual labor activities—such as collecting and selling firewood and selling easy to harvest

⁵ [Beyond Cash: Making Markets Work in Crisis](#).



leafy vegetables. Those that engaged in more skilled labor activities, such as teaching, tailoring, and construction, fared even better when it came to coping. These livelihood activities were less vulnerable to climate shocks, were in higher demand, and provided higher wages.

- Based on previous experiences with the 2011/12 famine and 2016/17 drought, some households made the choice to diversify their livelihood activities, establishing small businesses alongside their agricultural activities because they had fared better during previous crises. Moreover, participation in savings groups and VSLA programs helped them develop small nest eggs that later became crucial to supporting their households and livelihood activities during the drought.

Future rounds of data collection may look more closely at the types of businesses owned and sectors in which participants operate to understand which sectors coped better and which ones may need additional support from aid actors. This is especially important in areas removed from markets and supply chains.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Jaafarsadiq Hassan Mohamed
 Chief of Party
 Email: jmohamed@mercycorps.org
 Phone: +252 614 773 332

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